

Neve Rauscher, UT – 2022

As I walked across the Utah State Capitol to the United States Senate Youth Program finalist competition on the morning of November 3rd, 2021, I was nervous to say the least. It was one of the first times I had been in the building. Yet, the click of my shoes and the echoing of the voices of fellow Utah finalists carried an air of excitement. We were there because we all shared a passion for involvement in government, social justice, and activism. A passion that would continue to be fostered in the coming months as we prepared for Washington Week.

During Washington Week, while DC was not our home, the virtual space allowed all of the delegates to meet with leaders located around not only the nation, but the world. We spoke with representatives from NATO and the UN, an incredible opportunity especially given that the rapidly escalating Russian invasion of Ukraine was fresh on all of our minds. We got the inside scoop from NATO's Ms. Carmen Romero and Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield on what world leaders were dealing with and the careful actions being taken to support Ukraine.

We spent other days of the program focusing more closely on internal issues and policy the U.S. political leaders are facing. Naturally many of the questions we asked Senators and members of President Biden's Cabinet had to do with education in the U.S. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted disparities in our broadband internet connection, access to vaccines, as well as other crucial elements of education under a pandemic. It was really interesting to hear the work being done in real time to allow all students access to a better education. Associate Attorney General, Vanita Gupta, was one of my favorite speakers. Her talk focused on social justice reform in education, the police department, and the criminal justice department. She encouraged us as delegates to get involved in causes we care about from a young age. Learning about reform to public transportation was also a highlight for me. Keynote speaker Secretary Pete Buttigieg was direct in answering our questions, and incredibly engaging.

It wouldn't be Washington week without the obvious discussion of democracy in the US. We heard from Senators Chris Coons, Susan Collins, and Cory Gardner (two alumni of the program!) about the importance of working together across party lines, especially given the current state of division in the nation.

One of the highlights of the program definitely had to be the military mentor groups. Being in a virtual setting, finding a personal connection and getting to know some of the other delegates personally was really exciting, especially when small talk at lunch and between sessions wasn't an option virtually. The bond we all share with our military mentors and fellow mentees will last for many years to come!